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ABSTRACT

The University of South Carolina's Master's Program in International Business began in June 1974, with 43 students studying German and Spanish. The program began with a 9-week intensive language learning program, followed by a nine-month unified business program, with language instruction twice a week; six weeks of area study concentrating on the culture and society of the countries in which students will work; a second session of language instruction, lasting five weeks; and a six-month overseas work experience. Nine weeks of policy and strategy study at the University of South Carolina complete the course. The second class began in June of 1975 with 93 students from 20 states and 9 foreign countries. They studied German, Spanish, French, Portuguese and English as a foreign language. The paper also discusses the results of a study of the use of foreign languages in South Carolina industry. Forty-two percent of the original 774 questionnaires sent out were answered. Thirty-seven percent of the companies that answered use foreign languages on a daily basis; 84 percent engage in business abroad; 69 percent deal with non-English speakers; and 61 percent have employees competent in foreign languages. Discussion of the usefulness of foreign languages, not only in business operations but also in crossing cultural barriers, concludes the paper. (CLK)

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"THE VALUE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN BUSINESS"

A. Stebinger

Southern Conference on Language Teaching
New Orleans, October 3, 1975

The ability to use a foreign language in international business is one of the key elements in the University of South Carolina's new program for a Master's in International Business Studies. The need for this program was first seen by Dean James F. Kane of the College of Business Administration in 1972. At that time, he had a series of meetings with the managers of the many international companies which have established themselves in South Carolina. You may not know that investments by international companies in our state, as of the end of 1974, were valued at over $1,500,000,000. The Dean went to these companies to find out how the College of Business Administration could support their operations. Dean Kane then established a committee, under the chairmanship of Dr. Beazley, to work out the curriculum for a Masters in International Business studies program. The results of the committee's work are summarized in an article in the Spring 1975 issue of the Journal of International Business Studies. The intensive foreign language study plus a six months foreign work assignment are the features which make this program unique.

The first class started in June of 1974. At that time, we enrolled 43 students on two language tracks: German and Spanish. Our discussions with the heads of the international companies in South Carolina indicated that two of the most important requirements they had for training their American personnel were a decent working knowledge of a foreign language and understanding of foreign culture and society.

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The MIBS program can be entered only once a year on June 15th. At that time, entering students start an intensive instruction in a foreign language, or in the case of non-Americans, English as a foreign language. This is saturation teaching, with concentrated language learning from 8:00 in the morning until 4:00 in the afternoon. This continues through July and the third week of August, at which time the students get a week off. The beginning of September they start a nine month, unified business program and continue with language instruction twice a week. The main topics covered are Economics, Finance, Marketing, Financial Accounting, Managerial Accounting, Production and Organization and Management. This is a program with intense academic pressures. The students have titled it "South Carolina's Mega-course." They spend 20 plus hours in class each week and have a substantial amount of learning in new subjects to do outside of class. The rigors of the academic program, of course, breed an elitist spirit in this group. On May 15th they take two weeks off and return on June 1st for six weeks of area study, concentrating on the culture, the society, the people of the countries to which they will be going to work. On July 15th they start their second session of intensive language instruction and this continues through August 22. In 1975, instruction took place in the country where the language is used. We had one group studying German in Cologne, and a group studying Spanish in Medellin, Colombia. After a week off they go to work on September 1st in an overseas work experience that lasts 6 months.

The first class is now working in Germany with companies such as Burlington Industries, Korf Steel, Bruckner Machinery Company, the Opel branch of General Motors, Daniel International, Hergeth Machinery,

Hoechst Chemical, Bosch Auto Accessories and Bayer Chemical. In Colombia they are working for American companies such as Sears Roebuck, Goodyear International, Price Waterhouse, and Reynolds Aluminum and for Colombian companies such as Manifacturas Vanidad and Cementos del Caribe.

These companies expect the MIBS students to be able to work 100% in the language of the country. They do not provide interpreters to help them out in their work. We have asked all of these companies to give the students real work to do rather than training them in a traditional manner. Many of our students have already written us expressing their satisfaction with this program and telling us that they are acquiring a very useful experience in the overseas work.

The program calls for the class to return to campus in Columbia, South Carolina on March 1st for 9 weeks of policy and strategy study before graduating on the 16th of May. At this point they will have had 23 months of intensive academic, language and business instruction plus six months of work experience in an international company. We believe at that point they will be well qualified to enter into international business employment.

When we were discussing the design of this program with business executives, we found that 90 percent of them felt the knowledge of another language was important to effective administration overseas. We anticipate the students who complete successfully their six months work experience overseas will acquire a lasting fluency in their chosen language.

Our second class in the international business studies program started in June of 1975, with 93 students in five language tracks: German, Spanish, French, Portuguese and English for foreigners. The students came from 20 of our U.S. States and from 9 foreign countries.

The most popular language track was German with English, French, Spanish and Portuguese following in that order. The interest in German, of course is logical because in South Carolina we do have over half of the total West German investment in the United States.

In 1973, Professor William M. Morgenroth, Jr. of the University of South Carolina started a study of the use of foreign language by South Carolina industry. He sent out 774 questionnaires to South Carolina manufacturing plants and received a 42% return of his questionnaire. The interest in the use of foreign language was adequately indicated by this extraordinarily high percentage of returns of the questionnaire. Of the companies replying, he found that 37 percent expect to use a foreign language on a daily basis in their business. Eighty four percent of them today engage in business abroad and 69% deal with non-English speaking people in South Carolina. The companies reported 61% of them have foreign language capabilities on their staffs in South Carolina.

The ways a person in international business uses a foreign language might well be classified into two broad areas: the first, conducting business operations, the second, crossing the culture barrier. To deal with business operations first, most Americans outside the United States in 1975, are in supervisory, advisory or managerial jobs. English is increasingly the common language of the international business world but as Gunnar Beeth points out in his recent book "International Management Practice," "The first language an American must learn abroad is English, an English using short simple words, clearly pronounced in simple sentences that can be understood by those foreigners who have not had much exposure to the language." He points out that "Someone arriving in Japan begins by learning to understand and to speak the English spoken in Japan, which is quite different from any other English."

Certainly in my own experience, I've found on occasion our politer foreign friends smiling and nodding their heads-this often means "I hear you" and not, as the innocent newcomer might well think, "I agree with what you are saying." So much for the hazards of English as a means of international communication.

I think the utility of a language not your own in international business varies in inverse ratio to the complexity of the subject. A toolpusher on an offshore rig in Malaysia can easily learn enough Malay to make his Malaysian employees into a good working team and avoid their getting killed. It's easier for him to learn to yell "AWAS" when the pipe starts to swing than it is for an American, boss of a joint venture in Japan, to explain to his Japanese fellow directors why they should pay more than they want to for American know-how.

True bilingualism is, in my view, needed before you can handle, in a language not your own, the daily chores of top management. The fine shadings of language used in the evaluation of senior personnel, in making political and economic forecasts, in discussing complex financial analyses of investments, rarely come to a person who has not either learned the language in childhood or, as an adult, been isolated from his mother tongue completely and for a long time. As Richard D. Robinson

points out in his book, "International Management," "The major danger to management is that a person inadequate in the local language will nonetheless attempt to carry on as though he understood, or was being understood, at all times. The local community undoubtedly appreciates the foreigner's efforts to communicate directly, but these efforts should not be permitted to interfere with understanding." So for the vast majority of us, when you have to deal with a very complex business question, use your own language or have a very, very good interpreter.

Now, if we leave the boardroom and go to the more usual supervisory and advisory work, the use of a foreign language becomes both more necessary and more practical. In the first place, if you are trying to teach a Kuwaiti to thread pipe, he probably doesn't know a word of English. Secondly, the task lends itself to explanation in simple words. To get to more complicated tasks, in say, bookeeping, production operations and marketing, you still can do well with a reasonable command of the foreign language and you probably can't get along without it.

And at this point, we come to a somewhat special requirement of international business, one that might be less than universally understood in the academic world - the cant of business. If you've ever heard a chemical engineer from Texas trying to outline his problems to a Maine-bred computer programmer, you know whereof I speak.

Our classic language instruction has dealt with the best of each nation's culture and literature. But an authority on Voltaire may be stumped by the need to translate "joint venture" into French. So there is a great need to make sure students in an international business major get not only a foreign language but a foreign commercial language.

Now to refer briefly to the other major need of a foreign language if you are to work abroad, it appears to me crucial when we come to the very important task of crossing the culture barrier. The ignoramus who can't say "good morning" in Swahili isn't likely to get far in Kenyan business circles. I believe this is of the greatest importance in the developing nations where international business is finding new and rapidly growing opportunities. But whether you're in Paris, Patna or Perth, you need a demonstrable, decent regard for the people and culture of the host country if you are going to work with them successfully. And this, of course, goes for the whole family. It therefore follows that the whole family should take language instruction if you are going to make a real try to be successful in a culture not your own. I've worked in an American company in the U. S., with Germans whose wives never seemed to be able to learn any English. As the years went by, their lack of the language of the host country was, I am confident, a handicap to their husband's work and, I'll take the liberty of assuming, made their life here less enjoyable.

The young, of course, learn easily. I remember well struggling with my sheikh to learn just a little Arabic and then having these smart alec twelve-year-olds ruin my day with a detailed account of a long conversation they'd had with the gardener.

The willingness to work at the host country language is the most important way to show an attitude of interest and respect that is so much a part of bridging the differences between people of different nationalities. And here one might also emphasize the importance of using the language at every chance. Many people are diffident about showing their poor accent or erratic grammar. In the social context, this is rarely harmful and bloopers are usually forgiven. It may be difficult for an adult to try to speak in a new language imperfectly known but it is well worth the effort, perhaps providing your hosts with a laugh. If you don't take yourself too seriously, it is worth any momentary embarrassment you may feel. The ability to communicate with people who don't speak English is essential if you are to live other than a ghetto life abroad. But aside from just making your own existence more enjoyable, knowledge of the host country language seems to be the vital element in building mutual respect and trust with host country nationals. -- And without these, you can't do business successfully, no matter where you are.

Some of us have seen signs abroad advising "Yankee go home." It's no fun being in a country where these abound. But perhaps a variation of that slogan would be useful in concluding this talk. It seems to me the use of foreign language is so important to the successful conduct of international business that, if you're not willing to work at it, the best advice I could give is "Yankee stay home."